PLAYING AT RELIGION
Matthew 11:7-19
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

There is nothing quite as winsome as a child at play. Oblivious of time - detached from mundane realities, a child playing is a symbol of freedom, happiness, joy. Busily at work in a sand box, strongly swinging with head thrown back, intently arranging dolls or trucks, a youngster at play moves most of us to reflect for a moment or so on our own lost innocence and the simple fact that our moments of pure, concentrated, playful freedom are rare indeed.

Francis Thompson wrote, "Know you what it is to be a child?...It is to be so little that elves can whisper in your ear: it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowliness into loftiness, and nothing into everything...it is to know not as yet that you are under sentence of life." (G.A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p.51).

It is that "sentence of life" business that makes us alternatingly nostalgic and angry. Why does life have to become a sentence; duty rather than privilege; work rather than play? Where is it written that playing is only for children?

We need to recover "childlikeness", the psychiatrists are telling us. We need to give the child in us permission to be, to express itself, to enjoy itself. Generally speaking most of us need to be less serious, less determined, more spontaneous, more relaxed.

In particular we need to recover the childlike capacity for awe and wonder: the ability to experience what someone has described as the "Aha!" moment. We need - most of us - a gracious reprieve from the facts and figures our technology keeps producing in order simply to feel and know the mysteries and beauty of the world in which we live - and play - most of us need to recover our lost ability to play: simply to move away from those pressing, urgent concerns which haunt us through every waking moment and throughout sleepless nights: those nagging problems that color everything about us - even the way we treat the very people we want to love. For some of us it is something as simple as learning how to permit ourselves to enjoy ourselves: to take a week, or a day, or even an hour off to enjoy the activity of the moment totally, without a reference to what comes later, or what business we should be doing at the moment.

There are important theological dynamics at work in these aspects of childlikeness. Both the ability to experience wonder and the freedom to enjoy oneself are characteristics of the person of faith. Christianity has a word to say about both of them.

There is, however, another dimension to all of this. It is easy to become too romantic and overly maudlin about children and childlikeness. We do it regularly, particularly those of us who find ourselves living with and learning from very special children every day; namely, our own. Children are marvelous. They are not, however, the finished product. Helen Reddy sang a mushy ballad a while ago about a single mother and her child called "You and Me Against the World", and while it tugged at the heart of everyone who ever loved a child and wanted to provide for and protect a child, I couldn't help but conclude that if all that woman had going for her was the companionship and emotional support of her own child she was in deep trouble indeed. The trouble with children is that they have a distressing characteristic called childishness: not childlikeness - childishness.

My definition of childishness is unbridled egotism: that universal dynamic of children which prompts them to act in infancy, for instance, as if their hunger is the most important reality in the world, of sufficient urgency to warrant lusty screaming until it is dealt with. Praise God that we are made that way, but how sad whenever someone carries that dynamic into manhood or womanhood. Childishness is necessary infant selfishness which has overstayed its welcome. Childishness is also the propensity toward "Make believe".

George Arthur Buttrick observed that "It is the very essence of child's play to rate the production above the reality." (Obid. p.51). Children can play anything they wish to play without paying the consequences. People my age recall fighting the entire Second World War in our own backyards without suffering a scratch. It was possible to lead a charge, be wounded, carried off the battlefield, even killed, without being late for lunch. Nothing matters ultimately for a playing child. Nothing is real and that is the way it should be. But how sad when grown men and women carry that childish dynamic into adulthood when life is a series of rituals which mean nothing.

That, I would suggest, is exactly what Jesus thought one day when He had simply had enough of the petty, trivial criticisms leveled against Him. It reminded Him of nothing so much as a group of children playing in the market place in the center of town. The image is a striking one. Everyone had seen little ones playing two favorite games - "Weddings and Funerals", those important adult activities which invite imitation and grandiose exaggeration. Sometimes the whole generation reminded Him of that example of childishness; playing make-believe, going through the motions of religion without ever taking it seriously.

A decade or so ago that idea was brought to our attention by a psychiatrist, the late Eric Berne. Berne had been working on a new psychiatric theory called "Transactional Analysis" when he wrote a book to share his ideas with a broad and popular audience. The title of that book was Games People Play. Berne taught that many transactions between people are not what they seem to be on the surface. Essentially they are games which he defined as "...a recurring set of transactions, often reiterative, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation..." (Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy, p.104).

One of the simplest games to identify - because we have all played it is "Why don't you...Yes, but". "It can be played by any number. One player who is 'it' presents a problem. The others start to present solutions, each beginning with - 'Why don't you?' To each of these the one who is 'it' objects with a 'Yes, but...' A good player can stand off the rest of the group indefinitely, until they all give up whereupon 'it' wins." (Ibid., p.104).

A game of "Why Don't You...Yes But" sounds like this:

"My husband never builds anything right.
Why doesn't he take a course in carpentry?
Yes, but he doesn't have time.
Why don't you buy him some tools?
Yes, but he doesn't know how to use them.
Why don't you hire a carpenter?
Yes, but we can't afford to.
Why don't you just let him do it his way and live with it?
Yes, but the whole thing might fall down."

That's a game, according to Berne, because the person who presented the problem didn't want a solution. What she wanted was attention and sympathy. She transformed a group of her friends into parents and then proceeded to beat them at the game she had arranged.

Berne identified other games and gave them names: "If it weren't for you" - a favorite marriage game, "Uproar", "Ain't it Awful?" "You Got Me Into This", "Let's You and Him Fight" - and "Now I Got You".

The importance of this is that Berne taught that people play games in order to avoid intimacy; to replace honest adult communication with meaningless ritual. Playing games affords the luxury of not ever having to change the way we think or behave. It is simply to be confirmed and supported in the way we are already thinking and acting. The woman who played "Yes,but" so successfully managed to avoid confronting and solving the problem and to be confirmed as a helpless child whose difficulties are too overwhelming ever to be resolved.

What if that's what religion is? What if religion with all its paraphernalia, its rituals and creeds and books and vestments and steeples and pipe organs - what if all of that is an elaborate game designed, one - to avoid changing what we are and what we think, and two - to avoid intimacy with God himself? That, I would suggest, is the very serious question raised by our text this morning, filtered through the perceptions of Eric Berne.

Let's go back now and look more closely, this time learning the situation which surrounds the text. At the beginning of the eleventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel Jesus was talking with a crowd of people when several disciples of John the Baptist showed up with a message. John in prison, wanted to know if Jesus were really the Messiah. Jesus said, in effect, "I am." Now the text doesn't say so, but from what happens next I've always imagined that someone in the crowd snickered or guffawed at that point. After all, the Baptist was a ridiculous figure, wearing those old clothes, living all alone in the desert, eating locusts, and screaming about God and Justice and the Day of the Lord like a crazy man.

People backed away from John like the heat from a roaring fire. He was too hard, too demanding, too rigid, a moral fanatic. At the very same time, Jesus knew what the same people were saying about Him. He was too soft to be taken seriously. He was a glutton and drunkard, He was seen at wedding parties, and elaborate banquets and in the company of prostitutes.

He must have felt anger and hurt at the triviality of that response. And with the sarcasm that characterizes a lot of good comedy He said it reminded Him of those playing children. A wedding was a time of singing and dancing and drinking and eating that lasted a week. Children loved to act it out in their games. A funeral on the other hand included a solemn procession and hired mourners wailing, picking up hands full of dirt and throwing it on their heads, beating their breasts, and you can imagine how little children could get into that.

In Jesus' comparison, both games are going at once. One group wants to play wedding - the other wants to play funeral. They can't agree. Nothing gets done. Jesus was suggesting that not only were the people playing a game, the purpose of which was to help them avoid taking either John or Him seriously, they were also

playing a game called religion. This game has rituals and ceremonies that are fun but don't make a bit of difference to anybody, a game in which a man could buy a pigeon, have it slaughtered as a sacrifice to God, and then cheat his employees. It is a brutal and surgically accurate story about religious phoniness. It is a warning to religious people of every age.

Not long after Berne's book became so popular someone wrote a parody under the title "Games Christians Play" . It is an amusing little book, outlandish and, all too often, true. The author identifies a favorite church game as "I'd love to but..." The person who is it has just been asked to do a job and instead of stammering can say with great conviction, "I'd love to but". and then fill in with whatever comes to mind. Other favorite church games are -

"I don't know why they don;t do something about..."
"Nobody bothered to ask me..."
"I've got a great idea..."
"I don't mean to criticize, but..."

A Baptist game called "My Bible's more underlined than yours."

And, of course, "Mary Martyr" which allows everyone to play "What would we ever do without her."

Now,none of that is very important beyond the possibility that it may help us to laugh at ourselves. What is important - life and death important - is that you may be playing games to avoid confronting the truth. You and I may be playing games with our spouses, children, friends, in order to avoid honesty and intimacy. What is important is that you and I, beneath it all may be playing a game called religion, the purpose of which is to help us avoid taking seriously the reality of God.

Buttrick concludes, rightly - I believe, "The cardinal sin of John and Jesus was that they were real in a generation which was trifling at heart. Neither John nor Jesus was tepid." (Op. cit. p. 53).

The church, on occasion, needs to be reminded that when all it does is hold meetings to talk about itself - it is playing a game called religion.

Church people, on occasion, need to be reminded that if the content of a service of worship is isolated and walled off from the rest of life, they are simply playing a Sunday morning game ultimately no more important than golf.

Non-church people need to be reminded that to live as if there were no God, no ultimate moral standard, no eternal love, while secretly hoping there is - may be the biggest game of all.

The Old Testament prophet Amos talked about the essence of the matter when he wrote:

"I hate, I despise, your feats, your solemn assemblies...
"let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

The prophet Micah defined honest religion, stripped of all its games -

> "and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

And St. Paul, writing to the Corinthian Christians put it memorably:

> "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

Jesus Christ, we believe, was the incarnate Son of God. He was the symbol of God's love for us. He became that love so thoroughly that His death on the cross was on our behalf, and God's refusal to submit to His death is the joyful reality of our own resurrection. We live in His kingdom. Everything is different. Love is more powerful than hate: good is better than evil; honesty and justice are worth the effort; kindness and compassion and gentleness are the way life is best and most fully lived.

Jesus Christ calls us to life: real life. We believe that. We are convinced that it is a mistake to believe less than that; that simply to toy with the paraphernalia of Christianity out on the periphery of your life is to play a game: essentially a childish game.

We are called to adult, mature Christianity: to put away childishness. And we are promised the richness of life, life as God intends it, life full and complete.

Amen.

Father, forgive us when we play games with our religion. Forgive us for keeping you at arm's length. Help us to be open and honest and adult - as we follow Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.